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9. LONG-BILLED VULTURE *GYPS INDICUS INDICUS* NESTING ON TREES IN THE THAR DESERT, RAJASTHAN

(With one plate and one text-figure)

There are two subspecies of longbilled vultures *Gyps indicus* in the Indian subcontinent, differentiated on the basis of their distribution, nesting habits and physical features. The long-billed vulture (*Gyps indicus indicus*) is distributed south of the Gangetic plain, except extreme southwest India and Ceylon. The Himalayan long-billed vulture (*Gyps indicus tenuirostris*) is found in the Gangetic plain north to and along the lower Himalayas through Nepal, Bengal and Assam, where it is very common and in eastern Assam and Bangladesh (Ali and Ripley 1987).

Nest-site selection is the main behavioural difference between the two subspecies. The long-billed vulture nests on ledges of cliffs and hill forts, while the Himalayan long-billed vulture nests on trees in small colonies (Roberts 1991). The breeding season for both ranges from November to end of February, or latest up to March.

The long-billed vulture has been observed nesting on cliffs in many areas of Rajasthan, while the Himalayan long-billed was reported breeding in Ambala district, Haryana (Jones 1916). When I found five nests of the longbilled in Nagaur district, Rajasthan in May 1994 on *Prosopis cineraria* trees, I assumed that they were nests of the Himalayan long-billed vulture, because the species is already reported from Ambala in the adjoining state of Haryana (Jones

1916) and the nests were on trees. I took some photographs and made notes on the bird and nest (Plate 1, Fig. 1).

I came across another nest of the same bird in December, 1997 near Saanchu in Bikaner, Rajasthan (Fig. 1). The nesting bird was paler and the neck of the subadult was covered with whitish down. The neck of the bird guarding the nest was partially covered with down. One was sitting on the same tree and the other on another tree some 15 m away. The feathers on the legs extended well below the knee joints. The bill and cere had a yellow horn-like colour.

The nest was placed on the highest crotch of a *Prosopis cineraria* tree about 8 m from the ground, and was open from all sides. It measured 68 cm x 90 cm and had a depth of 103 cm. The measurement of only one nest was taken, after the juvenile had left it.

The nest materials were twigs of *Capparis decidua*, *Prosopis cineraria*, *Acacia arabica*, *Brassica campestris* stubble from a nearby field and some pieces of cloth. The tree on which the nest was placed was surrounded at its base by *Capparis decidua*, *Prosopis juliflora* and an unidentified thorny bush which grows to 2 m. All the five nests were on *Prosopis cineraria* trees growing in about one sq. km area.

This subspecies was confirmed by John Schmitt, a bird artist from USA, with the help of a photograph of the longbilled vulture on its nest.



Fig. 1: Long-billed vulture *Gyps indicus* on a nest in Rajasthan

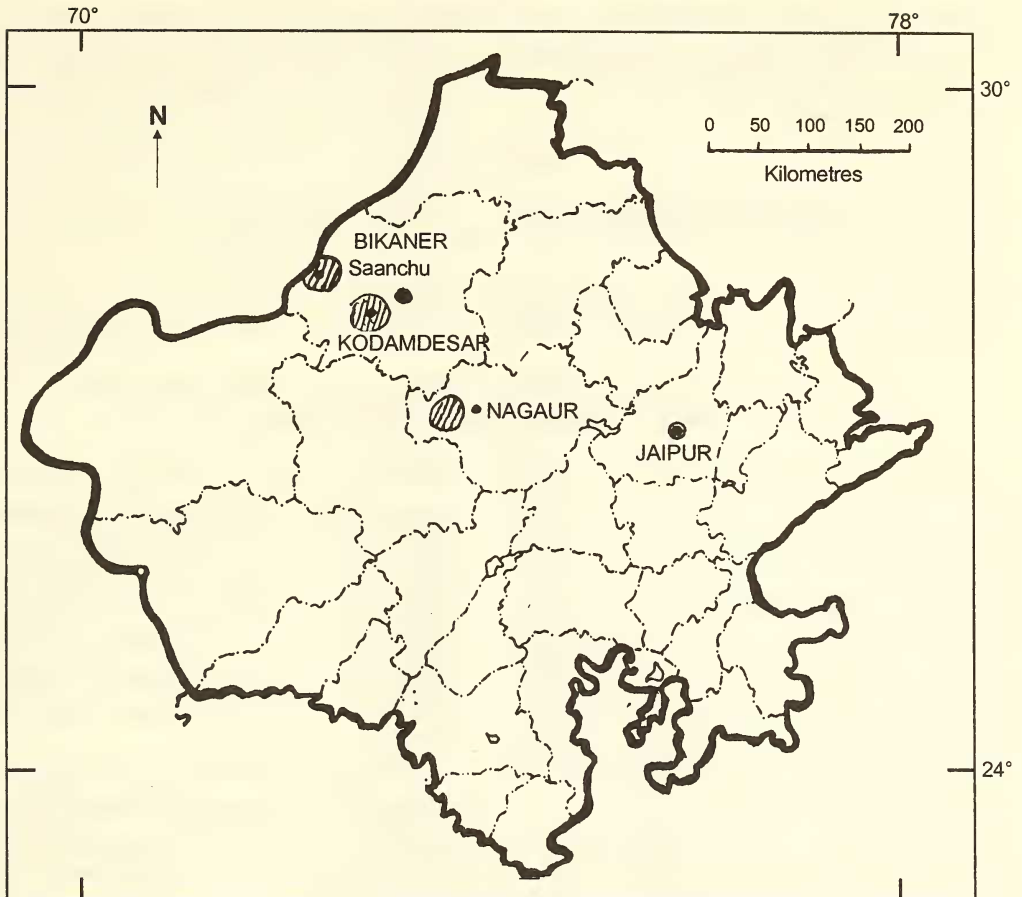


Fig. 1: Map of Rajasthan showing breeding locations of *Gyps indicus indicus* as barred area

These observations are interesting, as there are no breeding records of the Indian long-billed vulture from the Thar desert. Also, this subspecies has never been reported nesting on trees so far. Although Mathews (1918) has once reported long-billed vulture nesting on peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) trees from Lucknow district (Uttar Pradesh), he did not describe the features differentiating the two subspecies and used the Latin name *Gyps indicus*. It is possible that he observed the Himalayan long-billed vulture (*Gyps indicus tenuirostris*) which also breeds in the study area. I hope this information will be useful for birdwatchers interested in raptors and

inspire them to examine vulture nests in the desert carefully.

Nesting of long-billed vulture (*Gyps indicus indicus*) on trees has also been sighted by H.S. Sangha and Harshvardhan (*pers. comm.*) on a Khejri tree near Talchhapar Sanctuary in Churu district, and by Rishad Naoroji (*pers. comm.*) in Kodamdesar in Bikaner district.

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10. GREY-HEADED LAPWING *VANELLUS CINEREUS* (BLYTH) (FAMILY CHARADRIIDAE) IN KERALA

The Kole wetland is a vast water body spread over 13,000 ha in Thrissur and Malappuram districts, Kerala. It is located between 10° 20'-10° 40' N and 75° 58'-76° 11' E. The Kole wetland is inundated round the year. During November to February, different parts are under paddy cultivation, which is done after draining off the water into a network of canals throughout the wetland. The water in the fields is brought to the desired level, and one crop of rice is cultivated annually.

On January 28 and 30, 1999, around 1500 hrs we saw a lapwing in Enamavu area in the Kole wetland. Interestingly, it was located in a small patch of about 0.5 ha of uncultivated area, surrounded by paddy, c. 3 km off the main road and c. 500 m from the mud-topped road used by the farmers. The reason for not planting paddy in this area could not be ascertained.

Among the various species of birds present in the wetland, the 'unidentified lapwing' caught our attention. On closer examination through binoculars, we were able to describe the bird both in the sitting posture and in flight as follows: upper parts, excluding head and neck uniformly brown, head and neck grey with a brown tinge, chin and throat whitish, breast ashy grey, bordered by a black pectoral band across, rest of under parts white. Rump, upper tail

coverts and tail white, with a broad black subterminal band. Black band on the tail could be seen when the bird flicked its tail while at rest. Tip of the wings black. Bill bright yellow with black tip, legs yellow, iris red with narrow yellow eye-ring, yellow thickening near the base of the bill seen at close range. The bird was identified as the grey-headed lapwing (*Vanellus cinereus*).

In flight, the white tail with black subterminal band, and black tipped wings with broad white wing bands and a dark pectoral band across the neck are conspicuous. Under primaries were mostly black and rest of underwing white. From a distance, the bird could be confused with white-tailed lapwing (*V. leucurus*), but the black tipped yellow beak, dark pectoral band, and the black subterminal band on the tail distinguished it from the white-tailed lapwing. The grey-headed is also larger than the white-tailed, and also larger than the redwattled lapwing (*V. indicus*).

The bird seemed to be very shy and flew away at the slightest disturbance. As it was about to take off, it made a low pitched, single note *kek*.

The first author had seen a white-tailed lapwing (*V. leucurus*) from Enamavu Kole lands in December 1998. In February and March 1999, grey-headed lapwing was present in a particular